CIA

The Ben Barka Mystery

Shakes De Gaulle's Aplomb

By GEORGE SHERMAN
European Correspondent of The Star

PARIS—The crime itself began quietly and in broad daylight.

It was 12:15 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 29, 1965, on one of the busiest street corners in Paris outside a flashy new "drug store" on Boulevard St. Germain.

Mehdi Ben Barka, left-wing Moroccan leader twice sentenced to death in his own country and now a traveling revolutionary-in-exile, had flown in that morning from Geneva. He was a trifle early for his lunch appointment at the perennially fashionable Brasserie Lipp next door.

But Ben Barka never got there. The lunch was a trap to lure him back to Paris. The bait was a promise of negotiations to make a film about his anti-colonial activities in Morocco. As he approached the restaurant through the autumn drizzle, two plainclothes police stopped him. They showed their identity cards and then took Ben Barka off in an official Peugeot police car waiting across the street.

That was all. It took about 40 seconds. Ben Barka did not resist. He trusted the French police, was even protected by them. He was a personal acquaintance of French President Charles de Gaulle. But he has never been seen since that Friday noon.

Some details of what happened next have come to light, but nothing definite on Ben Barka's fate. The supposition in Paris is that the Moroccan leftist is dead — the victim of a brutal murder by his political enemies. But no one has produced a corpse or any positive proof of murder. The only evidence is based on statements of some highly questionable characters, one of them now dead.

Were it not for Moroccan graduate student Mohammed Azemouri, whom Ben Barka unexpectedly had in tow that October afternoon in Paris, the street episode might never have reached the public. Azemouri witnessed the whole thing.

Once he recovered from the suddenness of the operation, Azemouri telephoned Ben Barka's brother in Paris, Abdelkader. And when Abdelkader discovered that no official order had gone out to detain Ben Barka, he raised a public alarm.

Today, 12 weeks later, that alarm has finally pierced the pristine facade of President de Gaulle's Fifth Republic. France has become obsessed with "L'Affaire Ben Barka." No Grade B movie mystery could have a more macabre plot—kidnaping, probably brutal murder, the suspected suicide of one of the accomplices, an underworld network of thugs, police officials and secret police; foreign agents promising million-franc payoffs, and political intrigue in the highest echelons of government. Whatever happens, the purity of the "new morality" proclaimed by De Gaulle for the last seven years will never be restored.

Even the most respectable newspapers and magazines are treating the affair like one of those historic scandals which periodically have rocked the French state over the last 100 years. Whole sections and special editions are turned over to chronicles and charts of events and characters. Investigating magistrate Louis Zollinger, who first regarded his task as a legal formality, is now taking testimony 16 hours a day with the full cooperation of the government and against a backdrop of a public outcry.

President de Gaulle himself has furiously climbed down off his pedestal. In an outburst at a cabinet meeting last week, he is reported to have pounded the table and shouted that unnamed "smart alecs" in his establishment were trying to make a fool of him. He wanted straight answers to several blunt questions. Who was behind the Ben Barka kidnaping? Why and how were the French police involved? And why were the details of this involvement kept from him?

Add to those questions the loud clamor from De Gaulle's opposition to know why the Ben Barka scandal was hushed up during the presidential election in December and you get a measure of the crisis of confidence facing the regime.

Repercussions

Nor is the crisis confined to France. Morocco and France have just stopped short of breaking diplomatic relations; both have recalled their ambassadors and are exchanging insults. At De Gaulle's demand, the French government issued warrants of arrest for Moroccan Minister of Interior Gen. Mohammed Oufkir and two of his top secret police aides, charging they had organized the Ben Barka kidnaping.

King Hassan II, aware that Oufkir's 13,000 internal security troops are the pillar of his throne, has refused to give up his minister. In the balance is the livelihood of 120,000 Frenchmen still in Morocco and the $100 million aid France gives Morocco annually.

The Ben Barka scandal is also tarnishing the De Gaulle image in that neutralist "third world" he cultivates. Ben Barka was a favorite among the radical regimes, like Egypt and Algeria, in North Africa. He also was one of the organizers of the three-continent conference of revolutionaries from Asia, Africa and Latin America recently held in Havana, Cuba. His betrayal by the French police inevitably reflects on De Gaulle's expressions of good will toward emergent nationalism.

But the greatest shock of all has been the exposure of a brotherhood of intelligence services, part-time spies and old-fashioned hoodlums operating with little control inside and outside France. De Gaulle has moved swiftly to smash this underground anarchy. He has replaced Gen. Paul Jacquier, head of his chief intelligence service, the SDECE—Service de Documentation Exterieure et de Contre-Espionage (roughly the equivalent of the American CIA).

Pompidou Rebuked

He has also implicitly rebuked his top minister by transferring civilian control over SDECE from Prime Minister Georges Pompidou's office to the minister of defense. Disgruntled members of the SDECE already report that military discipline is being imposed. Civilians among the 1,500 employes in the Paris office are being pared down and replaced by men with military ranks earned outside the intelligence service.

De Gaulle has also moved to clip the wings of the secret police operating under Minister of Interior Roger Frey. Even the experts are not quite sure how many different police hierarchies cover France. They have grown up over the centuries. Today De Gaulle has ordered a stop to police proliferation, and a reorganization of the branches and has put an official outside of Frey's direction in charge of that reorganizing.

Symptomatic of the high suspicion surrounding the police is the talk about anonymous "parallel police" and Barbouzes ("bearded ones"), those unofficial police agents who operated in France and Algeria against the extremist OAS secret army. In the beginning they killed and

Continued